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**Disrupting “Business as Usual”: Teaching in the COVID-19 Era**

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**Disrupting “Business as Usual”: Teaching in the COVID-19 Era**

March 2020 ushered in a new age of uncertainty. The danger posed by a deadly virus, not just locally, but globally, and the lack of preparation to deal with unprecedented upheaval in “business as usual”, especially in education. Inequities in educational access and opportunities across racial and socio-economic lines was well documented prior to the pandemic, however, the move to online and/or hybrid modes of teaching and learning revealed how large the divide was in opportunities, support structures for learning, digital devices, and reliable access to Wi-Fi. This interplay of the existing inequities and the pandemic complicated not just school lives, but also family lives. However, the impact on some children’s lives was much more than others, with the repercussions being disproportionately borne by the historically marginalized communities. Systemic issues and the correlation of race and socio-economic factors in the US resulted in making minoritized communities most vulnerable to getting infected by the virus, facing job loss, eviction, homelessness, and moving residences in the middle of the pandemic. For this issue of Ubiquity, we had invited authors to share accounts of hope and possibility in academia, schools, classrooms, communities and beyond during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tinker Sachs, 2021). Given the context of an on-going pandemic, we wanted to explore what efforts, strategies and resources have helped to capture and sustain hope; and what new possibilities have opened up for learning, innovation, teaching, and research?

**Impact on Teaching and Learning**

The interaction of the systemic and contextual factors created by the pandemic negatively impacted the learning opportunities for the children who were already not being served well by the system (Hernandez, 2021). A recent comparison of pre-pandemic test scores of children with fall 2021 scores in reading and math has shown that academic gap worsened during the

pandemic and vulnerable children fell behind the most during pandemic learning (Schwartz, 2021). One study analyzed i-Ready scores of 3 million American students from fall 2021 and compared these scores to the 2017-2019 averages (Kuhfeld, et.al., 2020). Not surprisingly, more American students in fall 2021 were found to be two or more grades below their grade level than prior to the pandemic. These data clearly show the damage to learning access and outcomes caused by the pandemic. Teachers have shared personal accounts of devastating effects of the digital divide and inequitable resource distribution and the resulting impact on minoritized groups and children from low-income households (Akintunde, 2021; Bhatnagar & Many, 2022). The statistics below further elaborate on the learning loss during the pandemic in the American context:

1. About 50% students in predominantly Black and Latino schools are 2+ grade levels behind in math and reading in 3rd grade, which is 11-17% more than in years 2017-2019.
2. Similarly, 49% students in lower-income areas are 2+ grade levels behind in math and reading, which is 10-12% more than in year 2017-2019. (Kuhfeld et al., 2020).

These data make it clear that current approaches, especially related to teaching critical reading and math skills need drastic modification (Hernandez, 2021). As teachers and school administrators return to in-person school, they will need to work not only to get students back to a “normal” schedule, but also work on undoing the disproportionate academic harm caused to the most vulnerable student population (Schwartz, 2021). Also, it is imperative that policy makers pay attention to systemic inequities in education, specifically, allocation of resources to schools in high-needs districts, which are at the root of the digital divide and opportunity divide in

general. Some have called the present context our “Sputnik moment” where there is an urgent need for shaking up and reforming the structure drastically, since the old system did not work for all student groups (Christensen, 2020). This includes but is not limited to changing the funding structure, educational policies, curriculum, the values that guide their work, as well as their accountability to their stakeholders.

### **Implications for Teachers’ Work: Lessons Learned**

As teachers and students return to the “new normal”, a number of questions confront us as educators: What does teaching and learning entail? Are we going back to the same practices, systems and structures that created an access divide? What lessons have we learned from the pandemic? Are we as practitioners more flexible, compassionate, reflective about our practices? What have the policy makers and administrators done to narrow the digital divide? What are the options for creating more equitable access for quality education?

As a society, we need to aspire for equitable education, where the differences in educational outcomes are not caused by parental income level, power or racial affiliation (Muhammad, 2020). This would require partnership with parents, love and compassion for all learners, a trust in teachers as committed professionals for furthering the cause of equity in learning, and support from policy makers for access to equitable resources and opportunities (Hernandez, 2021; Matthews, Jessup, & Sears, 2021). Clearly, as a society, we are far from reaching this ideal. In such a situation, how should teachers be reframing their work to narrow the learning gap that has been further widened by the pandemic?

### **Learner Needs**

A focus on social-emotional learning during the pandemic was promoted by a number of superintendents of state and education departments which urged for patience and support in

education, rather than high-stakes testing and accountability (Haymarket books, 2020). One of the positive aspects of not being physically in the school building during the 2020-2021 academic year was that students were not forced to take the standardized tests that are usually routine in any given year. Instead, the focus shifted to formative assessments, giving students meaningful feedback, and supporting their learning through interactive activities online or in a hybrid environment. All over the world, teachers mentioned providing more guidance and agency to students to be creative about their learning, and develop metacognitive skills and higher order reasoning, rather than focusing on getting a right answer (Darling-Hammond, 2020). To deal with trauma and loss caused by the pandemic, many school systems were also forced to come up with support for students and families with additional resources, school liaisons for community and family engagement, professional development for teachers to focus on social-emotional learning and not focusing solely on test-scores (Shrinivasan, 2019).

Research showed that when teachers’ view of parents shifted from outsiders to valuable partners in the teaching process, students’ engagement and learning outcomes improved (Mecham et al., 2021, Wagner, 2022). Also, an increasing use of learner-centered approaches such as problem-based learning, collaborative online learning, hands-on manipulative activities, and building a classroom community helped with motivating and engaging students (Bhatnagar & Many, 2022). When teachers incorporated students’ funds of knowledge in teaching and focused on real-world applications, learning experiences became authentic and students were more likely to become self-directed learners.

### **Critical Race Theory and Racial Justice Debates in the Society**

While teachers and students were adapting to life back in schools, other debates brewed in the US this year, about how schools would operate: mask mandates (or opposition to them),

vaccine mandates (or opposition to them), and teaching for equity and social justice (or an opposition to critical race theory) (Hixenbaugh, 2021). This climate of extreme divisiveness around safety issues such as, using masks and vaccines to keep students and school staff safe, have surprisingly turned aggressive energy towards the very teachers and school administrators we entrust to educate our children (Shivram, 2021).

To layer these complexities with additional confusion and misinformation, teachers and school administrators are facing the wrath of conservative groups from all over the US about the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in schools. Although CRT and its tenets are not widely taught in P-12 schools, this immense opposition aims to suppress any discussion of historic and systemic inequities and create awareness and enlightenment in school students around these issues. Legislation purporting to outlaw CRT in schools has passed in 36 states, with some states including consequences like fining teachers for bringing up topics on racism or bias in the classroom (Stout & Wilburn, 2022). This situation was thrust upon teachers when they were already dealing with a lot of unprecedented factors during COVID-19. In an environment where teachers were trying to implement social-emotional learning in their classrooms to combat learning needs created by digital divide and inequitable resource distribution, these political pressures from parent groups, school boards and policy makers to restrict their academic freedom and limit their agency in the classroom, further complicated the job of teachers (Hixenbaugh, 2021). While minoritized communities had already borne the brunt of the pandemic disproportionately, a ban on CRT meant that teachers were being prevented from unpacking these inequities in their work as teachers and provide the compassion and support students desperately needed.

**Positive Indicators and Implications for the Future**

A positive aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic has been that the schools were pushed in new ways to bolster their partnerships with parents, as virtual schooling required parents’ support for ensuring children’s learning and success (Matthews, Jessup, & Sears, 2021). Schools and teachers gained a new appreciation for parental involvement and strong school-home communication channels to ensure academic success for students (Akintunde, 2021). In of itself, this stronger school-home connection has been thought of a positive change, considering the historic alienation of parents who from low socio-economic and minority communities (Matthews, Jessup, & Sears, 2021) in educational spaces.

Schools have also been forced to think about issues of digital equity related to access to: (1) reliable internet connectivity, (2) equitable distribution of devices, (3) skilled and committed educators, and (4) enhanced learning opportunities through the use of digital technologies (Matthews, Jessup, & Sears, 2021). Not only is access to digital equipment a priority, aspects of digital equity such as quality of educational content, culture identity, and representation of the student population in the curriculum should also figure in our goals for digital equity (Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, & Viruleg, 2020). School districts, educational think tanks, and universities are also collaborating to develop acceleration inputs and providing scaffolds in form of tutoring intervention to support grade-level proficiency. This is also a progressive thought as compared to the traditional approach using remedial help, which tends to reinforce previous grade’s content, and is thought to be promoting a deficit perspective (Dorn, et. al., 2020).

Beyond digital access and quality of instruction, attention is also needed for social-emotional wellbeing of children and the services needed to ensure well-rounded health and readiness to learn. School districts have recognized the need for specialized service personnel

such as social workers, school psychologists and counsellors, who work with students, families, and communities to understand student contexts and address issues that might impede learning (Akintunde, 2021; Darling-Hammond, 2020).

### **What Can be Done?**

The climate of contradicting values and ideals, in the middle of an ongoing pandemic has made teaching a profession fraught with tension like never before. On the one hand, teachers are being expected to teach to meet the social-emotional and academic needs of the students to eradicate the learning lags caused by the pandemic and inequities, on the other hand, the teachers are being restrained from using the very techniques that are proven to be effective in learner engagement and success. Understanding multiple perspectives, being an ally of the students and their communities during this difficult time and teaching with criticality while giving students tools to respond to injustice in the society (Darling-Hammond, 2020; Muhammad, 2018) are important tools in making education meaningful and enlightening. As the learning gap during the pandemic has shown, it is more crucial now for teachers than ever before to be indulging in anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices and utilizing more humanistic and compassionate teaching approaches (Haymarket Books, 2020; Muhammad, 2020). The resistance against these practices might be intended to inhibit or intimidate educators, but as committed teachers, it is upon us to advocate, find avenues for resistance, and push ourselves to truly teach for enlightenment and empowerment (Hixenbaugh, 2021)!

The vexing problems and needs for learner engagement cited in the literature above are also reverberated in the articles in this issue. DeGeorge, Salter & Thompson-Smith share how their lived experiences as high school teachers or university instructors were fraught with tensions around personal safety, struggles with student engagement and motivation, coping with

confusion around mandates for masks and vaccines, and adapting to the “new normal.” The authors elaborate on the role of instructors during this tumultuous and divisive period in encouraging discussions around criticality, and teaching strategies that stimulated critical reflections upon their identities, privilege, and empathy. As mentioned in the literature, authors in this article focus on the role of instructors as role models, the importance of focusing on social-emotional learning, and positivity.

Similarly, Spanke and Johnson share their use of multimodal literacy strategies as ELA instructors in high school and university courses to promote critical reflections among students. Through their various activities and assessments, the authors tapped into the role of figurative language to foster a sense of democratic citizenship, the importance of critical thought, open exchange of ideas, debate, and perspective taking to create a deeper understanding of competing values and ideologies among students. The experiences of the two authors showed how the success of strategies used by them as instructors depended on their personal connection with students, knowledge of students’ interests and context, and an ability to apply critical thinking skills to real life situations.

In the third article, Dellalonga elaborates her experience with Zoom teaching, online fatigue for both teachers and students, and the importance of integrating arts with reading instruction to promote student engagement and enhance reading comprehension skills among elementary aged students. The inclusion of art in teaching provided the necessary hook to younger students who were becoming disengaged and losing motivation because of prolonged online teaching over Zoom. Students’ use of drawing and coloring of their own inferences from the texts led to deeper understanding of text, developed critical thinking skills, and promoted a love of reading and art.

In summary, this issue of *Ubiquity Praxis* strand focusses on the voices of instructors, both at the P-12 and university level, the practical problems faced by them during the pandemic, adapting to the “new normal,” and their approaches to teach in creative and socially just ways. These articles share examples of instructors’ strategies in promoting learner engagement and critical thinking skills, while grappling with complexities arising from COVID-19, a climate of political divisiveness, and Zoom fatigue. There are important implications arising from these articles for our work as instructors, specifically around the salience of social-emotional learning in education.

Thank you for reading our work and as always thank you to our reviewers!

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